

# ROCKET CITY NEON

## Outdoor art tour designed to lure tourists to Camas

By Sharon Michael  
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There's a conspiracy afoot in beautiful downtown Camas where foot traffic is sparse except during Camas Days and the Christmas parade.

The plan is to get motorists, locals and passersby alike, out of their cars and walking around the downtown area.

The co-conspirators in this plot include David Benko of Rocket City Neon, Camas Downtown Association members, and many business owners and other downtown boosters. The group hopes to recruit more supporters when Benko presents the proposal at a city council meeting in the near future.

Benko proposes installing 16 vintage neon signs on the rooftops of buildings in downtown Camas to create a museum of vintage neon art that he says will not only lure passing motorists off of Highway 14, but make Camas a planned side trip for visitors to Vancouver and Portland.

"It could potentially be that hook to attract some of the tourists — the drive-by traffic," agreed CDA director Beth Hovee.

A walking tour map would be made available at downtown retailers to guide visitors through the city's business district with stops at each building displaying one of the neon signs.

Benko said there are several reasons for placing the signs on rooftops. "We want them

to walk around," Benko explained. "If you made it too easy, people wouldn't have to get out of their cars."

Another "big reason" is that "they look more majestic — they're on a pedestal," Benko added. Rooftop locations will also prevent confusion about what businesses actually occupy the buildings. He said the signs would be placed so visitors will understand "clearly that's not the business inside."

A winking Buster Brown, the trademark winged Flying A horse, Van De Kamp's original blue windmill, and a 6-foot clock are among the 16 pieces that Benko has offered to restore and lend to the city for five years. He estimates the cost of restoring, installing and maintaining the signs at \$60,000 for the five-year period.

"There's a lot of groundwork that needs to be laid, but there's a lot of interest," said Hovee. "We haven't endorsed it yet. We're working it through our committees. There are people who are very excited about it. Others have a lot of questions."

"Neon is fun. It's lively, and I think it can be presented very tastefully outdoors and get people on the streets," said Hovee. "It would take a lot of research and funding to pull it off." She said the CDA is working with Benko to identify potential funding sources.

Benko operates Rocket City Neon, a combination neon sign design, manufacturing and



restoration company and full-service graphic design business, out of the American Legion Hall on Northeast Third Avenue in Camas. The building also houses Benko's neon sign museum, and he rents the hall for parties and catered affairs.

Benko handles the neon sign work and the museum. Kirsten Hendrickson, a graphic designer who is also Benko's fiancee, handles the rest of the business, including scheduling the reception hall and preparing food for parties.

The 1940s and '50s neon signs bearing company logos, antique gas pumps and glowing electric clocks, light up the huge hall. Benko's eyes light up, too, when he talks about his ideas for the Camas Historical Outdoor Advertising Museum.

Benko said the idea for the outdoor neon exhibit started with a conversation with CDA president Dorothy DeHart about tourism.

"My business brings in outsiders," he said. Benko has customers all up and down the West Coast, and some in Germany and Japan. His local customers include Cyclone Computers, the 2nd Avenue Diner and Never Lu's, but his business draws more from Vancouver and Portland area companies.

Benko said customers visiting his shop for the first time almost always say they had no idea Camas was so picturesque. He said he suggested to DeHart that he put two or three of his vintage signs on display downtown to encourage people to stop and look around. DeHart liked the idea, he said. "People started getting excited about it, and it kept growing."

"Now (we're) looking at a package of 16 good signs, representative of what you may have seen in the '40s and '50s in 'Anytown, USA,'" Benko added with a light in his eyes.

Benko is very optimistic about approval of the project. "The first day that I drive down the hill and see those signs, it will be amazing," he said.

Vintage neon art is more than a business to the 30-year-old entrepreneur who started collecting antiques when he was about 8. "My parents collect true antiques," he explained. "Seventeenth and 18th century stuff." He spent a lot of time in antique stores with his mother, so he decided to start his own collection of bottles and telephone insulator caps.

"By 12, I got into advertising and signage," Benko added. He started his neon collection when he was a film school student in San Francisco after he learned from another collector that neon could be repaired. His first piece was a "Time To Insure" clock that was given to him. When he inquired about the clock, neither

the owner nor occupant of the building would claim ownership. Each insisted it belonged to the other. "So they both said it was OK (to take it), as long as it was all right with the other," Benko said.

During the next five years, he collected 60 neon clocks. Along the way he also completed a six-month apprenticeship and went to work for Ace Neon in Everett, Wash. During the five years he worked for Ace, he did side work repairing antique signs and continued to build his own collection.

Benko said he finds signs "virtually everywhere." He has purchased signs in 44 states, but he doesn't have the time now to spend on road trips searching for new pieces. "I buy and sell and trade with people," he said.

"The original idea here was as a nice showroom," said Benko looking around at the hall that now houses the eclectic mix of businesses that he and Hendrickson have assembled in the building.

"But it's not about money as much as the preservation of the stuff," Benko said. He said many traders are splitting two-sided signs and globes and selling them separately to double their profit. "It just absolutely drives me crazy," he said.

Benko owns some split signs and globes, but when he finds a second half that matches, he pairs them up. "I'm fighting the tide of what other people are doing," he said.

Benko is proud of his collection, which includes four "very rare" gasoline company signs: Polly Gas, Richfield Eagle, Mohawk, and Seaside. "No other collector in the world owns all four of these signs," said Benko with pride.

He did manage to part with a rare Shell gasoline sign. "I have missed it, but it put in the air conditioning," said Benko. He has spent \$60,000 in the last two and a half years refurbishing the legion hall that formerly served as a skating rink and a children's gymnasium school.

Benko said if all goes well, the outdoor neon exhibit will be in place in April 1998. He can hardly wait. Until then, visitors are welcome to call 834-6366 to schedule a free tour of the approximately 70 storefront signs, vintage gas pumps and other commercial advertising memorabilia housed in the Rocket City Neon museum.



David Benko (top) showed off part of his collection of neon signs, including those in the process of being restored. His collection includes many familiar classics like the Greyhound bus (upper left). The Rocket City Neon Advertising Museum and Reception Hall holds many other vintage treasures. Benko and Kirsten Hendrickson (left) selected a tune from a 1959 Wurlitzer juke box, which he said is the first stereo juke box made. Antique gas pumps, like the Gilmore Gas pump (above), are another of the collector's passions. They are hard to find now, but there are several on display at the museum, including an even older glass-topped pump. Staff photos by Sharon Michael.



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